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Jealousy

when the
new baby
comes home

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Jealousy

Are you wondering how your young son Bill will react to his new baby brother or sister when he or she arrives? Or the new baby is already home and you're worried about your pre-schooler's behaviour.

Bill's attitude to the new baby will depend on his age, whether or not he was the first child, his experiences with other people's babies, and the kind of child he is.

Children show a variety of reactions to a new baby — pleasure, mild interest, a complete lack of interest, mild or temporary distress, or long-term and intense upset.

Such a mixture of feelings towards a new baby is common; any one child can display any or several of these reactions over the course of time.

Bill may enjoy being a “big” boy and try even harder to feed and dress himself, and to help mother. If he's three or more years older than the new baby and has friends and interests outside the home, he may be very happy and proud of the new family member.

However, it's common and normal for a young child, at times, to show genuine resentment, jealousy and dislike of a newborn baby.

He may have these upsetting feelings days, weeks, and even months after the birth and they may be repeated. But these common signs of resentment don't mean that your child doesn't care for the new baby.

A growing attachment and affection between your children will occur as the older child discovers that you still love him and care about his feelings — that he hasn't been replaced.

You can't prevent your child from feeling angry or resentful . . . but you can minimize these feelings. How?

Before the Baby Comes

Here are examples of how you can prepare a pre-schooler.

Begin by telling Bill about the birth ahead of time so the baby won't come as a complete surprise. Have family discussions, show him books that he'll understand, point out the physical changes in Mom, tell him about your plans for the baby's room and let him ask questions.

Announce the baby's arrival simply and matter-of-factly. Avoid going overboard in "selling" the baby to Bill. Don't lead him to believe that he'll have an instant playmate when the baby arrives, or he'll be rudely disappointed.

Make major changes in Bill's routine months before the birth or well after the arrival of the new baby. Examples of major changes are: Starting nursery school, changing bedrooms and graduating from crib to bed.

While mother is in the hospital, try to arrange for a familiar adult to stay with Bill in his own home.

When the Baby Arrives

It may seem to Bill that he has suddenly been removed from the "number one spot." He'll miss the time and attention that used to be his. And he may be jealous when the new baby uses his crib or his high chair.

He may react in one of the following ways:

1. **He might regress** — to act in "babyish" ways. While he has painfully learned to feed and dress himself and become toilet-trained, he'll see that the baby, who is helpless, gets more attention.

As a result, he may go back to soiling and wetting, to demanding a bottle, to wanting to be held and rocked, as if to say, "Maybe if I act like a baby again, Mummy will give me love and attention."

What should you do?

Usually you won't be able to talk him out of this, and punishment will only make him feel that Mom and Dad no longer love him or that they love the baby more. Try giving him his juice or milk in a bottle instead of his cup. Dress him yourself.

Hold and rock him. Forget toilet training for awhile. The regression will usually last only a few days or weeks; once his infantile need is satisfied, he'll gladly be a big boy again.

2. *He might show anger and hostility* towards the baby — hitting, pushing the baby, taking the baby's toys, even suggesting that you throw the baby in the garbage. He may suffer from nightmares, or display temper outbursts.

What to do?

Be firm. He must understand that slapping or pinching the baby is not acceptable. You may have to restrain him or remove him from the situation. Be sure to cuddle and reassure him that he's a good boy, but that he can't be allowed to hurt the baby.

Instead of talking him out of his anger or jealousy, let him know you understand how he feels, by saying, "You're really angry. You feel Mummy loves the baby more than you . . . you wish you were the only one." The language you use must be at the level of the child's understanding. Remember that your actions of love speak louder than words.

Perhaps you can help him play out such feelings by giving him a sturdy rubber baby doll with diapers, toy bottle, etc. He may care for it, or he may thump it over the head.

Most important, give him some private time with you each day, free from distractions and from his younger sibling. Give him attention that is exclusively his . . . perhaps while baby is sleeping.

Father's relationship with the child makes a difference, especially if Dad takes an active interest in child care after the new baby's arrival. Dad's interest and care will help make up for the loss of Mom's.

When visitors admire the baby, make sure some attention is paid to the older child. Praise his latest accomplishment. You could say, for example, "Bill, why don't you show our visitors the nice picture you coloured today?" If visitors bring a gift for the baby, try to have a special treat, or a token gift on hand for the older child as well.

Try to keep his daily routine as it was before the baby's arrival.

Encourage him to handle the new baby and to share in caring for the baby. Newborn babies are not easily broken!

Make a real effort to encourage his interests and praise his accomplishments.

Remember

While it's not possible to prevent your child from feeling angry, jealous, or resentful towards a new baby . . . you can minimize these feelings with understanding and large doses of that all-important love and attention.

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